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Six principles of action for working with low-income groups were discussed. Action principles are not the self-evident result of knowledge about low-income cultures. They largely depend on the goals which are anticipated for low-income individuals. The action concepts suggested should be viewed as generalizations and guide lines which must be used flexibly and employed individually.

In working with low income groups the positive features of their culture should be stressed. A social worker should not hide his own status nor pretend to belong to the lower class. Pretentiousness is easily suspected and a person is typed as "phony." A successful way of achieving informality is by playing or accepting the role or position of a brother, boss, client, or friend of a low-income individual. Social workers, at the same time, must be careful to avoid being manipulated by low income youngsters. In helping a disadvantaged person adapt to a middle-class occupational role, a worker should aim for accomodation to certain middle-class structures rather than deep internalization of all middle-class values. Finally, it is a necessary action principle for a sincere worker to validate himself or prove his interest and trust in the low-income individual and thereby to overcome deeprooted prejudice and antagonism toward the middle-class.

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MOBILIZATION FOR YOUTH

TRAINING AND PERSONNEL

Action Principles for Working With Low Income People*

Frank Riessman
September, 1962

Part II

Look For the Positives

Do Not Pretend to be Lower Class

Role Playing vs. Role Distance

Resist Being Manipulative

Accommodation vs. Internalization of Middle Class Values

Validate Yourself

*Special thanks are due Sema Gorkin for considerable editorial assistance.

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One can derive principles of action for work with low income people in many different ways. They can be derived from systematized knowledge about low income groups or low income culture; from the experience of practitioners who have worked with low income people in various capacities. knowledge concerning the culture of a group does not necessarily lead to one specific action. One may hold a particular view or possess information of a certain kind about low income groups. Yet this knowledge can lead to different kinds of action, depending upon which element in the culture is stressed. For instance, one might emphasize: the anger of the low income group, the desire for education, the feeling of underdogness, etc.. The choice of element to be stressed may determine different kinds of action.

Beyond this, different kinds of action might flow even from the acceptance of one element as crucial. For example one might take anger and alienation as the central feature and, conceivably recommend tranquilizers for this group, or, one might deal with anger through an entirely different approach, namely, the use of role playing through which the anger is brought out and worked with. Though we might share the same knowledge about a low income group, the action or approach to be taken on the basis of this knowledge is certainly not self-evident. It will depend on other premises and expectations, on what kind of outcome is desired or anticipated for the low income group. Two practitioners may use the same action principle for entirely different underlying reasons. For example, in the school system today the techniques of role playing and visual aids

are widely accepted as useful in working with low income children on the implicit or explicit grounds that these children are non-verbal. One might recommend the same techniques, (role playing, and visual aids), not on the grounds that low income groups are non-verbal, but based on the belief that these groups verbalize around direct experience, in response to things seen and felt. In this context they are quite verbal. (An interesting point with regard to role playing is that most people who have experience at the action level with low income groups report that this technique is excellent regardless of their particular underlying beliefs or knowledge about low income culture).

How do we arrive at the most appropriate and fruitful action principles for work with low income groups? Hopefully, these principles are based upon a consideration of certain issues involved in the direction of low income culture. But, do we simply want to reflect the goals, and tendencies of the group we are dealing with?

An interesting case in point is psychotherapy. The aims and hidden assumptions of psychotherapy as it is presently organized are ill-attuned to the expectations and, cultural attitudes of low income groups, and need to be made more congruent with those needs. This can be done, in part, but it cannot be accomplished completely because there are some essential elements in psychotherapy which are not consistent with the wishes

and demands of low income people, e.g., the desire for magic, quick cure. This is a desire which is held by many low income patients. They want a pill and assume they will magically get better, but this unreal expectation has to be exposed to the client. He must understand he cannot be given a magic cure, and while mental illness is something like physical illness, it is not exactly the same as physical illness. Furthermore, one finds that most low income clients do not have any particular positive notion of mental health. Their main concern is to get rid of symptoms. This may be fine up to a point, but at certain junctures, one may want to introduce objectives of mental health other than the goal of symptom reduction. A central concern is, certainly, that of modifying the theory and practice of education , psychotherapy and casework, to make them more consistent with working class and low income needs and wishes; but this consistency cannot be total. Certain points of strain and conflict must arise when sound mental health concepts which are not consistent with the present direction of low income life are introduced.

The following action concepts have to be seen as generalizations and used as guide lines. They must be used flexibly and they must be employed individually.

Look For The Positive:

What are some of the specific action principles that we might want to begin with? The first principle, one which seems to be almost self-evident is that one begins with the positive elements in a culture or a person when trying to introduce a change. This seems like an obvious policy, but there are some issues connected with it which have to be discussed.

First, you have to find out what the positive is, what the strengths are. This is not easy to do, because in the typical situation the low income client comes to you in a crisis when his difficulties are in the forefront. He has failed in his defenses; he has failed in his methods of coping with the environment at this particular point and that is the thing which is paramount. His strength is in the background; it is beneath the surface and you have to do a good deal of searching to find it.

Second it is not very easy to find out about other cultures, particularly low income cultures. You might say, "it is easy for me" because either "I come from such a culture", or "I have had hundreds of cases, thousands of days of experience with people from this culture." Experience can be misleading in many situations, and while experience with low income individuals is necessary, it does not lead to knowledge in a simple and direct fashion. People who come from the culture themselves may have a fundamental reservoir of knowledge which is the product of their experience as participants. However it is not an easy matter to obtain this knowledge from them for a variety of reasons. They may have been deviants in the culture they came from, which might be why they got out of it. They might have been exceptional; they might not be representative of this culture. Moreover, the process of getting out of it, that is, acquiring professional roles, requires that they go through a school system, an educational process which deosn't particularly reward familiarity with low income culture. For the most part, they would

tend to suppress their backgrounds and to de-emphasize their "native" culture since identification with it is not especially useful in acquiring the middle class occupational role and status.

Also, they may have left the culture because the negative features in the environment were particularly apparent to them. The depressing features, the crowdedness, etc. may have been much more significant to them than the humor, the sports, the music, the fellow feeling, the cooperativeness or any of these positive things. The latter may have been obscured. These "deviants" may not have sought participation in the positive aspects of the culture having been most impressed by its negative features. Their summary feeling may have been: "This is a bad life; I want to leave it."

Despite these factors, much can be learned from someone who comes from the culture itself, not by evoking the most salient features he recollects, but by probing more deeply and encouraging the recollection of positive elements in his experience.

Let us turn to the person who doesn't come from the culture but who knows it from professional experience. "I have hundreds of cases; don't tell me I don't know about these people. I know all about them." There are very obvious answers to this. The first is that when an individual gets to know people via his professional role he is limited in many respects. He does not see the whole life of the client; he doesn't see the joyful times; he sees mainly the difficult times. Second, the

low income client may hide a great deal of his life and feelings from the professional for obvious and good reasons. It may be useful for him, or he may think it is useful for him, to put on a middle class front as far as possible or conversely, it may be important for him to build up great stories of violence, sadism and other negative and extreme behavior in order to impress the social worker, startle him, test his real concern.

There are a variety of reasons why it is difficult to find out about another culture, but in this case there are some special difficulties because of the presence of conflict lines between the professional and the lower income client role. (A mediating factor here is that some elements in American culture can cross class lines, supplying an immediate meeting ground for the acquisition of knowledge about low income culture). There is also the tendency to use a middle class yardstick in viewing low income behavior and this is not easy to overcome. We tend to see things in terms of the familiar, in terms of what the behavior means in our own social context. The claim of "experience" is, by no means, a guarantee of knowledge. It may be a very narrow slice of experience, a very limited sampling of cases.

Just one autobiographical word: I worked for about ten years in a Tenants Council in a low income community. Through living in the community, playing ball, going to parties, dances, and funerals, I came to know these people, in the totality of their lives. My experiences and observations from the first year, to the second year, to the fifth year, and finally to the tenth year--changed enormously. What I saw at the beginning, and what I saw later on, were vastly different. This

was largely because over a long period of time and almost imperceptibly, I gained partial acceptance in the community. I developed many close friendships in the community and saw people in their everyday lives, without the limitations inherent in the professional role. But direct experience does not provide knowledge on all levels. There are things I have learned from scientific studies that I never observed. Actual participation cannot avoid selective perception in terms of a particular focus. However, the decline of role distance between the low income members of the community and myself over a long period of time allowed for many different kinds of perceptions to take place.

Do not Pretend to be Lower Class:

When working with low income and working class people, one should not hide one's status . . and pretend to be something one is not. (When I worked in the West Side community, my speech and dress were those of a middle class professional; the fact that I was a college professor was known to all). In contrast, this is an approach practiced by some professionals in an attempt to "come on," be like the people they are working with. Some workers . . . acquired "hep" language and feel that they have to use it in order to relate to the youngster. There is a vast distinction in style and background among those who work with low income groups so that some workers may be very quickly accepted, while it would take others a much longer period of time. But pretentiousness is immediately suspect. If you can't "be yourself," you will be seen as a "phony."

The people who attempt to be informal and down to earth are trying to minimize the problem of role distance. They are trying to say, "I am like you, I am a regular fellow." But in a social sense they are not. Even if by background, they have a common bond with the low income client, they are not like him in their present roles as professionals.

Role Playing vs Role Distance:

One of the best ways to cope with the problem of role distance is through a particular use of role playing. The leader of the session, the social worker can very early in the role-playing process participate directly by taking a role. In other words, one can get out of the distant leadership position and participate as directly as possible in the actual role playing by accepting a role as the client's brother, friend, boss, or the role of the client himself.

The worker will discover that he will be seen in the light of the role he is playing. Informality becomes legitimate in this context, e.g., the worker takes his tie off, behaves differently, changes his language. Participants understand what he is doing, enjoy it and the constraint of the role distance is reduced.

Resist Being Manipulative

Social workers working with low income youngsters often discover that these youngsters can be very clever in interpersonal relations. Often these youngsters try to manipulate the social worker. Sometimes the social worker tries to "outslick" the "slickster", and himself becomes a manipulator.

In effecting immediate contact with a gang, that is, in the early transition stage, some of these tactics may be necessary, although we would

argue that even here it is extremely important to keep this tactical dishonesty to an absolute minimum and to search constantly for different honest approaches. After all, it is this first "testing" phase which is decisive in forming a pattern or base for the worker-gang relationship and what occurs at this stage should represent the essential features of the treatment approach to follow. Even more troubling is the fact that apparently the worker often appears to enjoy the manipulative game and utilizes it to displace his hostility feelings toward the youngsters.

Accommodation vs. Internalization:

Another action principle of importance relates to the adaptation of the low income person to a middle class occupational role. For example, when a youngster wants to get a job the worker may want to prepare him to assume a certain role which involves having to wear a tie, talk a certain way, fill out forms, etc. This can be done in at least two different ways. One way is to attempt to have him internalize middle class values, that is, to impress him with the virtues of cleanliness, neatness, articulateness, etc. Another way is to urge him to accommodate or adapt to this situation by behaving in certain expected ways which represent no great value, but are simply a means.

Certainly, most people who move from low income status to acquire a middle class role in life, have learned the required form on their own. Their adjustment pattern might well be suggested to people who are trying to make an adjustment to a middle class role. In other words, low income people who attain a middle class occupational status have not necessarily internalized many middle class values. While they may have accepted some, and may pay lip service to others, they haven't become carbon copies of some middle class stereotype. As a matter of fact, many never do acquire with great intensity the

cardinal middle class value pattern - the concern with prestige, and individualistic, competitive advancement. (Let me say parenthetically that I am not suggesting that all middle class people have this highly competitive orientation. I am suggesting that most middle class people have faced this problem in life and to some degree either accept it or struggle with it, but they cannot ignore it.) The whole concept of the nouveau riche, the popular concept of class adaptation, is that when a person moves from one class to another, he takes over the values of his new class in extreme, stylized, stereotyped fashion. This is true for some people (mainly lower middle class people who rise) and in some situations. It is an exaggerated formulation when applied to the lower class as a whole. Often, low income people are much less conspicuous and do not intensify middle class values in achieving a middle class role. As a matter of fact, many middle class people who are of working class origin avoid ostentation and achieve a subdued kind of assimilation. The change in style accompanying change in class status is in the direction of under-playing middle class values. It is not the conspicuous over-acceptance of newly acquired values.

It is often true, however, that the low income youngster who acquires middle class status will fear the loss of family and peer group ties without any new ones to replace them. Very often the middle class person of low income origin finds that the warmth and closeness of his former ties are irreplaceable.

The cohesiveness of the low income environment often overwhelms its negative elements and becomes a disturbing loss for the mobile individual. This is one of the sources of personnel conflict in moving from one class to another.

For those who have maintained some roots in the "native" environment there is still another problem. Former peers and relations may view them as "a little different", and withhold complete acceptance.

Validate Yourself:

Often you have to prove yourself with the low income client more than with the middle class client. The low income client is probably suspicious and questioning of you. This reflects, not stupidity, but alertness, based on ample experience, regarding the / possibility of being manipulated. He is not sure of you and you have to, in a sense, validate yourself.

The school system provides a great deal of illustrative material. For instance, a teacher might say, "I am sincere, I really want to teach these kids. Why are they antagonistic toward me? I'm not prejudiced." But the fact of the matter is that the school system, in general, from its P.T.A. meetings to its I.Q. tests, to its personality tests, to its readers, has discriminated against low income youngsters, has been highly negative toward them and their parents. They are aware of this and therefore are suspicious of the teacher. The teacher has to validate himself, has to demonstrate that he is different and worthy of trust. This can be done fairly quickly and doesn't require periodic repetition. The teacher should not get up and say, "I'm for you." His sincerity has to be demonstrated by action. He has to demonstrate that he is really there to teach children, not just to maintain order, and that he believes these/have an interest in education. He is deeply concerned that learning take place and will not swerve from this goal. This determination will be quickly perceived and youngsters will begin to point him out as a different kind of teacher. In every school low income youngsters will tell you about the exceptional teacher. "He is a good teacher, he is strict, but he is O.K." It is only in the middle class that a contradiction between

strictness and humanity arises.

Immediate trust can never be won, but if the worker persists in his basic aim, whether it be helping a youngster find a job or helping him to obtain an education, the desired response will be forthcoming. Over-sentimentality and love are inappropriate and injurious for the youngster. Sincere concern should be evidenced for the youngster simply wants respect and genuine assistance.

Conclusion:

Principles of Action (for working with low income groups).

Action principles do not simply follow in self-evident fashion from knowledge about low income culture. Action suggestions depend, in large measure, on goals anticipated for low income individuals.

A. Don't pretend to be lower class.

B. Resist being "slick".

C. Stress the positive features of low income culture: The cooperativeness and mutual aid that mark the extended family; the avoidance of the strain and accompanying competitiveness and individualism; the equalitarianism, informality and humor; the freedom from self blame and parental over-protection; the children's enjoyment of each other's company, and lessened sibling rivalry; the security found in the extended family and a traditional outlook. The enjoyment of music, games, sports, and cars. The ability to express anger; the freedom from being word bound; and finally, the physical style involved in learning.

D. Be alert for a variety of models and goals. Aim for accommodation to selective middle class structures rather than deep internalization of the central middle values (e.g., prestige, individualism, etc.)